

## **Child Labor in the 1930s**

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During the Great Depression, an estimated ten million adults were out of work, but children continued to work in growing numbers, especially in cities like Chicago. Children were forced to work long hours to provide food for their families. Now, there are laws in Chicago and in the United States that children can not work unless they are over sixteen years of age.

During the Great Depression in Chicago, thousands of men and woman were out of jobs and were supported by their children. Most kids worked in sweatshops with long hours and very poor pay. Boys worked in meat packing. The girls sometimes worked on sewing and weaving clothes, cloth, and gloves. A lot of children also worked in their family's business or worked in sweatshops.

Some laws helped child labor in Chicago and in the United States. Franklin Delano Roosevelt created the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) in an attempt to relieve industrial unemployment by eliminating unfair trade practices. Thus, minimum age standards were incorporated in five hundred separate industrial codes. Even with this law, child labor was still practiced in Chicago and in the nation. In 1935 the Supreme Court ruled that the NIRA gave the president too much power and that it was unconstitutional.

Almost within a year, the number of employed children increased 150 percent. With more children in the factories working ten hours a day, the safety of the children

decreased. For example, the boys worked with no gloves or suits, with large, sharp knives that could easily cut them or someone else's hand. In addition, girls worked in the fabric factories and had to be very careful around the large machines. As more children came to work, the working conditions worsened.

In 1938, the Fair Labor Standards Act was passed. The Fair Labor Standards Act clearly prohibited the employment of any child under the age of fourteen. In addition, the act stated that teenagers under the age of sixteen could legally hold a job but only when school was not in session. But luckily, a Supreme Court had new members that were not so sympathetic to big business upheld the law. Because of the Fair Labor Standards Act, children under the age of fourteen do not have to work in the harsh sweatshops or slaughterhouses.

Today child labor is defined as the illegal employment of children. Also when children work longer hours than allowed by law, their compensation is unfair, illegal, or nonexistent, and when the working conditions endanger their health.

Also, federal laws now are more specific than they were in the 1930s. Children between fourteen and sixteen years of age may not work more than forty hours in any week when school is not in session, and only, three hours in one day when school is in session. Children may not begin work before 7:00 a.m. or work after 7:00 p.m. except during summer vacation, when they can work until 9:00 p.m." Sixteen- and seventeen-year olds can work as many hours as they want in all jobs not declared hazardous by the Secretary of Labor. State laws, including Illinois, however, are far more restrictive.

Most children today work for themselves. During the Great Depression, children worked to support their families. Children now work for money so they can spend it on gifts for themselves or others. Also, the types of jobs differ from 1930. Teens now work in stores like Jewel Osco or Walmart. Teens in the 1930s, however, worked in factories with sweatshop conditions.

In conclusion, child labor has changed over the years, from sweatshop conditions to practically no child labor in the United States. It was helped by some laws passed like the National Industrial Recovery Act, and the Fair Labor Standards Act. But, even with all this support, there is still some child labor in the United States and all over the world. [From Susan Bartoletti, *Kids on Strike*; Laura Green, *Child Labor: Then and Now*; Page Smith, *The Rise of Industrial America*; and R. Conrad Stein, *Child Labor Laws*.]